愚物語

するがボーンヘッド

CHAPTER TWO
SURUGA BONEHEAD

Orokamonogatari

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Translated by »sawa«

EPUB edition

Suruga Bonehead

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譯ヤクモノ物ガタリ語

‘Translated tale’

A fan translation project.

Note

All names are given family name-first in kana spelling. Most honorifics are preserved.

Japanese is not italicised in general, except in notes.

This translation uses British English.

This translation uses a two-tier note system in addition to a glossary:

Untranslatable concepts and puns that would benefit from some immediate explanation will have notes ordered **numerically** with **square brackets**. (e.g. [2])

Terms in Japanese that only require brief explanation will be in the glossary. Such terms will be underlined (as a link) **only on their first appearance**. Clicking on the terms in the glossary will bring you back to where they first appeared.

Decently-translated puns, references, trivia, in-depth explanations comparing the original Japanese with English etc. that are not necessary to understand the text but are of interest to the reader will have notes ordered **alphabetically** with **curly braces**. (e.g. {C}) It is recommended to either view them after finishing a section, if not the whole chapter.

It goes without saying not everything that can be noted is noted.

001

I cannot remember for the life of me when underclassman Oshino Ougi first appeared. It felt as if we've been together since he transferred, but I don't think there was any catalyst for our amity — if someone were to say it came with time, I'd probably agree. No, I can vaguely remember how I first met that self-proclaimed number one fan of mine if I put my mind to it, but every recollection comes with its own slight variation, or a complete overhaul.

A chance encounter, or an introduction from Hanekawa-senpai, but it wouldn't sound wrong if I said we met via text, and I also think we got familiar with each other through the basketball club… the more I think about it, the more I'm certain we only met yesterday.

It'd probably be better to ask him directly, but whenever I see him with his pitch-dark pupils and his pitch-black grin, my questions just magically go away, even until today.

Eh, what matters isn't the past, it's the present.

For Oshino Ougi's existence doesn't seem a menace.

002

‘Hey, Araragi-senpai, I really don’t want to say this, but haven’t you become a bit careless about cleaning my room recently? I was on the fence over this, but for your sake, allow me to say this: to put it bluntly, you’ve become tardy. If you’re cleaning my room, then please make sure you do it more thoroughly. I thought you were the one who offered to clean up my room, Araragi-senpai? This sort of half-assing is no different from not doing the job at all.’

In response to my loyal words of sincere advice to my saviour, Araragi-senpai flew into a larger fit of rage than I expected, so I ended up doing this month’s cleaning all by myself.

If Araragi-senpai were still in high school, I don’t think he would be so impatient as to reject his junior’s modest advice, but I guess this is what adulthood is all about.

Araragi-senpai is now nineteen years old.

In a different world, that’s the same age as the Nonsense Bearer. {A}

Being left alone aside, I didn’t spend the year just staring at Araragi-senpai while he swept up my room — it is about time to let the world know that Kanbaru Suruga, eighteen years of age, is fully capable of skilfully cleaning her own room.

I say ‘let the world know’, it was more letting grandpa and grandma know — yet in this entire row with Araragi-senpai, I was given a good talking-to from that sweet old couple. They went about it in stages like a hook turn. I can’t believe grandpa and grandma sided with their granddaughter’s senior over their own granddaughter… I was truly shocked.

Whatever.

As long as they see my room squeaky clean, grandpa and grandma would be impressed — with that in mind, I furled my sleeves and spent the first day of my last high school summer break not doing

my homework, but cleaning my room.

I may have mentioned ‘this month’s cleaning’, but to do this every month would leave me little room to study for university, so I’d better do it today and keep it up for the rest of the year — what matters is the accumulation of hard work, though the only thing that’s accumulating right now is trash. Once Araragi-senpai sees how tidy my room has become, he’ll surely apologise.

But he’s not even replying to my texts anymore…

To lose the will to clean by myself just because my senior is in a bad mood is ultimately a poorer reflection on myself; well, this situation calls for less brain and more brawn.

Once I make some progress in the morning, take a picture and send him with ‘I’m giving it my all today’, surely he’ll reply back.

This is only the first time I’m being ignored by Araragi-senpai — as I consoled my broken heart, I started preparing to clean the rubbish dump that is my room. The gloves go on first.

Everything here could get hurt with a bare touch.

Another look around revealed how dire it was.

It’s like a monkey came and wrecked the place.

Nothing was moving, but I could hear this onomatopoeic ‘gochaa…’ sound of messiness in my head. Not being able to see the floor was not a surprise, and nothing that should be upright stood upright. I’ve had my athletic training in sports clubs so I can handle it, but in this state, fixing this room would normally be beyond the reach of any ordinary girl…

Anyway, I’ve prepared a hundred seventy-litre bin bags for the occasion, though they’d have to come in much later… first, I needed to sort out these delicately balanced stacks.

Araragi-senpai has always scolded me like someone at the end of their tether; my room may be big, but the amount of stuff I have dwarfs that floor area. I’ve got way too many things…

Not the actual meaning of the word, but it's literally overbearing. {B}

Funny that I've bought loads of storage boxes for today's clean-up, yet the boxes are precisely the things that are taking up all the space… I'm going to need storage boxes for these storage boxes.

Storage boxes aside, I've got all these cardboard boxes and polystyrene that're just useless junk… maybe I could move them to the next room over?

A thought like that ignores the fact that the next room over is also full of junk; 'what about the rooms next to that?' I wondered as I wandered over, and discovered the equally sorry sight they were in — the amount of rubbish is making me want to torch the whole lot.

But even though some things look like trash, upon gently inspecting every single piece, thoughts such as 'this is still usable' or 'I really wanted this when I bought it' pop up, and all of a sudden, it's a lot more necessary. Necessary things becoming unnecessary as they pile up — what kind of logic is this?

And by that logic, how could I hope to finish a section by the end of morning? Not even an entire summer break would be time enough. An unkempt room isn't that big a deal anyway; I can study on campus or in the library, and if I don't have room to sleep, then I'll stay over at Senjougahara-senpai's place — these 'reasons why not cleaning up is fine' started filling my head, taunting me.

After all, it'd be bad if I get injured cleaning up, and I might as well use the time to train for my return to basketball club in university — a rather valid reason for not cleaning, and certainly very tempting, but I held out in the end, because I want to make things right with Araragi-senpai.

Hope, this is.

But I guess you can also call it vindictiveness.

…However, upon thinking about the time limit I've got, there isn't enough time to sort everything into what I need and what I don't; if

I don’t proceed with the steely determination to throw everything away, that finish line would never be in sight. And the floor, for that matter.

I will have to give up all of my possessions.

Recycling? Giving them away? I’d rather sleep.

Just throw them all away regardless.

Discard discard discard discard.

Discard^{100}.

A bit of a shame, but whatever.

I’ll just buy again when it suits my fancy.

Keeps the money flowing.

There’s plenty of stuff that couldn’t be bought a second time, though given they were part of the pile in the first place, it probably means I might as well have never had them.

Even so, I still have to sort out the incinerables… but this district is quite lax with this stuff, which I guess is a silver lining… I’m just a bit worried about the environment though.

With that, I gave myself up to giving my things up.

003

No doubt about it, when I'm finally taking on the task of cleaning my room for practically the first time in my life, I am my own worst enemy — nothing's being done. While throwing away everything I come across is a reckless battle my personality's somewhat suited for, I can't help but pause sometimes.

As expected, whenever I discover something that would affect my life if I threw it away, I had to make a hairy decision on the spot; sometimes I find a key I don't know the lock to, sometimes I find what looks like a mechanical part, which, never mind if I need it or not, I cannot even be sure what it's for in the first place, which means I don't know if I can judge whether it goes to the bin. I feel like an archaeologist, sorting out the fossils from the rocks. Those unidentified objects I set aside, which piled up quite rapidly — I think I ended up with more of a mess than when I started.

Without realising, the entire morning had passed. I should have cleared out an entire section by now, but if I sent a picture of *this* to Araragi-senpai, chances are he'd hurry over here out of worriment — though this was technically a way of achieving that goal, it's also the least mature way of going about it.

If I could spare time for lunch, I could at least also spare time to clear out one square centimetre of floor space; with that thought, I continued focusing on cleaning, but soon I found another object I've never used, but I'm uncertain about throwing away.

No, I've never used it, but I've seen it.

That's —

That seems to be a mummified left hand.

'…Huh?'

It's my most shocking moment so far today.

A mummified left hand? From wrist to palm?

A human's — no, a monkey's left hand. A monkey's paw.

Hey, wait, that's weird.

This couldn't be here.

Because of that devil.

Lord Devil, Numachi Rouka, the Rainy Devil she collected, that mummy should definitely be in that child vampire's stomach —

'Well, well. Leftovers, I see?'

'Waah! You scared me!'

While I gingerly held this mummified part — the left hand — a voice came from behind, making me let out a terrible cry, and throwing away that mummified left hand I never had a grip on.

The mummy that was a brief, unexpected 'reunion' once again disappeared into the mountain of trash, which was a big enough problem on its own, but before that, I needed to turn around and deal with this voice first —

'Hey, hold on! That's strange! How are you here, Ougi-kun!?'

'Ha-ha. Strange of you to say "that's strange". I'm always by you, Kanbaru-senpai.'

My questioning was met with Ougi-kun's usual — usual, right? — nonchalant reply. Oshino Ougi-kun. Even with my animated words, even with that trash mountain in front of him, he looked completely unmoved; one would not expect this from such an androgynous, quiet-looking type.

Come to think of it, this is the first time I've seen him in casual clothes…

A pitch-black long-sleeved shirt in the summer break, yet not an air of stuffiness from him. Quite the contrary, it felt cool — chilling, even.

Is this kid wearing black socks too?

‘I’ve popped over because you’ve asked me to. You said you wanted Ougi-kun to help you clean your room no matter what, so here I am.’

‘Is… is that so?’

I did want to clean up this pathetic bedroom of mine alone… but well, I also think there’s no reason Ougi-kun would make such a barefaced lie, so he must be right, I just remembered things wrong.

‘The fault lies squarely on me for not welcoming you. And to be honest, with a room like this, there’s no room for serving you tea, either.’

‘Ha-ha. That’s all right, I am Suruga-senpai’s faithful junior. If anything, this room showed me some of Suruga-senpai’s human side, which is making me like you even more.’

Delivering that sentence with a grin, Ougi-kun is sounding a bit facetious — but now that he’s said that, well, I’m not exactly unhappy, I just feel that there’s always something eerie, something more to this kid…

He’s here to help though. Can’t complain much.

‘But with so much stuff, this really is a big problem. Bit overstuffed, innit?’

‘“Overstuffed” is a bit much, I wish you’d say “overdecorated” instead.’

‘A superbly neat alternative, but please, it’d be much better if you neatened your room. They say having too many things is a sign of a complex. A lack of self-confidence leading one to build up possessions and fill a void in their heart.’

‘Who’d you say has a void in their heart?’

I may have returned with a retort, but this was an impressive accusation — I have to be more wary around this junior.

‘Generally, the people who have messy rooms are the ones who like having messy rooms — the kind of people who like latching onto their mementoes, who like keeping a complete record of themselves.’

‘People who like…’

‘To put it another way, by throwing away or tidying up their stuff, it’d hurt them deeply by reflecting how meaningless their lives are — something like that? If one puts in feelings to their possessions, then to deny them meaning and worth would be the same as denying meaning and worth to oneself.’

With him saying that, I feel like I might have that sort of tendency. The type to hoard everything.

Everything — including stress.

Welling them up past the limit — and then, kaboom.

‘Well, well, no need to think too much of it, it’s just some perspective, that’s all. Besides, some things are difficult to give up — like this *purikura* album. A collection with your juniors from clubs?’

‘It’s not a collection. They were begging me to take one with them, and it gradually turned into an album over the years… it’s about five hundred yen for a *purikura*; really cheap, so we just took a ton of ’em.’

‘Ha-ha. “Really cheap”, is that so… I really want to see what’d happen if I told that to a certain Miss Someone.’

‘A certain Miss Someone?’

‘Never mind. Anyway, that first chapter back there was so unbelievably, depressingly gloomy, on a level that required substantial editing just to get it published, so do please excuse lil’ ol’ me as I try and brighten the mood for everyone.’

After all, I do feel I have some personal responsibility for what happened to her — a strange thing Ougi-kun just said.

‘So, without further ado, allow me to do your laundry. It brings me immense honour to wash Suruga-senpai’s undergarments.’

‘I can’t have you doing that, can I?’

‘My, my. Not happy about mixing your laundry with mine, I see? Ah, puberty…’

‘Since when are we washing *your* clothes as well? What is this, a sleepover? Get out of here.’

At once, ideally.

No, now’s not the time for that.

‘If you’re here to help, then could you help me find the mummy you made me threw into the depths of the trash pile?’

Indeed, Ougi-kun should already know about my episodes with the mummified monkey from last year and this year, so there’s no need to explain that to him — he knows, right? He did say ‘leftovers’…

I don’t remember telling him about what happened to the mummy in the end, but if he knows, then that means I’ve told him.

That said, I don’t realistically think there can be ‘leftovers’. That vampire has a voracious appetite, after all, and I don’t think she’d miss anything.

Was it me then?

Could it be a large part of a figure that I accidentally thought was a mummy… I don’t remember buying a figure of a mummy, but given my nature, it wouldn’t have been a surprise for me to have bought *anything*.

Or maybe, as unpleasant a thought as that may be, it somehow got in before winter cleaning — I didn’t do the cleaning, of course, Araragi-senpai did — before I left them as a ‘snack’ platter?

I really am as thoughtless as I appear if that’s the case.

‘Ha-ha. If it’s not leftover food, then it must be left over from your heart, Suruga-senpai.’

‘From my heart?’

From my heart?

‘So all I’ve got to do is find it? That’s alright, easy peasy. Ha-ha, reminds me of when I did fieldwork in that deserted village.’

A deserted village — even worse than an abandoned town, such was the metaphor chosen by Ougi-kun, as he fearlessly and agilely navigated the unknown depths, no floor to reference, no path to follow, zooming into the abyss without giving a damn.

Not caring if he stepped on something.

I guess these are the guts one needs for cleaning up… meanwhile, even though I know full well I’m throwing them away, I’m still unwilling to step anywhere outside the exposed floor; Ougi-kun really is trusty support after all.

‘Careful, Ougi-kun. There could be something sharp down there.’

‘No worries, I’m sharper.’

He quipped, shoving away that sofa of mystery (whilst it made an ominous gnarling crushing sound) and leaving a trail of destruction in his wake, as he climbed into the room’s furthest depths.

He may look meek, but he won’t give pause in stomping and pummelling his way through… quite the sharp, hazardous whirlwind of destruction he is.

Such destruction does make throwing things out easier, though as the nephew of the specialist Oshino Meme, fieldwork doesn’t seem his strong suit, as it requires not disturbing the scene… he probably left the abandoned village in worse shape than when he began.

‘Oh, what’s this?’

Ougi-kun stopped and made a deliberate noise. I’ve got a bad

feeling about this; it's the same tone he uses when making fun of his seniors.

'What is it, Ougi-kun? If it's just BL novels, I don't see the fuss.'

'Speaking of BL novels, they're already there at the entrance. The really raunchy stuff, too. What's with this *Savage Garçon* series? "I'll suck off your bones too, Savage Garçon", what's that supposed to mean? Suck off whatever you want, but that's not what made me stop here.'

With that, Ougi-kun launched a kick, collapsing the mountain beside him — even though it was a mountain of trash, this was a bit too savage.

Unbridled, even.

Which was the same sort of feeling I get from Araragi-senpai cleaning my room; looks like this unconcernedness comes only when clearing out other people's stuff… anyway, it did open up new horizons.

For once, or should I say, once invisible to the corridor, long-obscured by piles of rubbish, I can finally see the fusuma — and.

That mummified left hand had speared through it.

'Aaaah'

'Aaaah'

This warranted more than just an 'aaaah'.

If it was just that trash pile that piled up like sediment, since I was going to throw that away, I don't care if that got stomped or damaged — ultimately the only thing that would change was the sequence — but breaking the room, that's another matter.

With this amount of stuff piled up, I originally expected filthy walls or tatami mats, but I wasn't expecting a broken fusuma…

'Uh-oh, that fusuma with a beautiful Japanese painting got broken,

all because you threw that hand away, Suruga-senpai.'

'D-don't pin this all on me. It's all because you spooked me from my back.'

'Now, now, blaming your underclassmen I see? Are you the type who goes "I got spooked by their technique" when someone steals your ball in a basketball match?'

'Uhhh…'

I'm at a loss for words in this conversation, but when I think about it, something's off. By his logic, he seems to have spooked me on purpose… well, that might well be the case.

I say 'might', but this kid really is more of a fright.

One thing's for sure, a long-forgotten fusuma has now resurfaced with a hole in its centre. Surely the monkey's paw that shouldn't be here should be paramount, but the fact of 'I broke part of the house' weighed more heavily on my mind.

Is this what's meant by 'there may be a war going on somewhere in the world, but it's not as important as my cavities'… hmm, grandpa and grandma may have given up on me cleaning my room, but a broken fusuma would mean a talking-to of unforeseen levels.

This was more than just a child crayoning the walls.

'This fusuma looks really expensive. Could it even be a national treasure or a historical relic? From my evaluation, in the old days this would even be sufficient for dowry.'

'I don't need your evaluatin'. Sigh… what should we do?'

'Anyway, stomachs need filling. I picked up some fusuma bread on the way here.'

'That's bran bread in English, and stop making it look premeditated with that low-caloric bread of yours. Just get the hand back here for a start.'

‘Roger that. I’ve never defied an order from Suruga-senpai, and I’m not doing that today either.’

Loyal only in action, the junior went boldly for the mummified paw. The mummified paw that had speared through the fusuma was unceremoniously yanked out.

Which made the hole bigger, it seemed. Ah well, nothing I can do about it.

‘Oh, hello there, what’s this?’

Ougi-kun tilted his head.

Squishily tilted his head — frankly, disgusting, but I can see why he did that.

Because.

That monkey’s paw extracted from the fusuma was tightly gripping something — when I last saw it, the hand was clearly open, but now it was clutching what looked like a letter from inside the fusuma.

004

脳を混ぜて髪を蓄えろ

Blend the brains, do up the hair

顔を掛いて喉をくくれ

Hang up the face, affix the throat

鼻口を合わせて耳目を集めろ

Combine noses and mouths, assemble eyes and ears

歯を増やして舌を繋げろ

Increase the teeth, fasten the tongue

角を募って爪を積め

Seek out the horns, save up the nails

肉をこねこね骨を束ねろ

Squish the muscles, bunch the skeletons

皮膚を重ねて血管を結べ

Stack the skin, tie up the veins

腕を組んで脚を納めろ

Fit the arms, tidy up the legs

胸を寄せて腹を占めろ

Gather the chest, occupy the abdomen

腰を貯めて角を募れ

Store the hip, seek out the horns

肘を招け膝を呼べ

Bring out the elbows, summon the kneecaps

指紋を採れ声を狩れ

Collect the fingerprints, hunt for the voices

涙を汲め踝を統べろ

Absorb the tears, subjugate the ankles

胃袋をつかめ腸を掘れ

Grab the stomach, dig out the intestines

心臓を縛って肺を揃えろ

Bind the heart, bring the lungs

命を奪って魂を抉れ

Seize it of life, gouge out its soul

005

When you see someone, you don't picture what their organs look like; similarly, I barely ever thought of a fusuma having an 'inside' — for that inside to contain a letter is something I have never imagined.

The letter, the letter the mummified hand grabbed.

It feels kinda like one of those wardrobe-lurking killers or a hatchet-man-under-your-bed kind of horror story — if one were to exaggerate, that fusuma could be a portal to another world, such was the terror.

The mysterious letter, with its cryptic yet powerful prose, wasn't much help.

If I hadn't.

If I hadn't recognised that handwriting — I would've ripped that letter up on the spot, that's how unsettling it was.

'A handwriting you recognise? Ho-ho, that's an interesting way of putting it. Ah, could it be your own hand, Suruga-senpai? A secret poem you wrote in middle school that then slipped into the fusuma via a gap?'

'What secret poetry… who did you think I was?'

A hot-blooded sportsman, I was.

Didn't have time for feelings.

…Besides, if it did come from a middle-schooler, I would be *very* concerned.

'I've never seen a middle-schooler that wasn't a cause for concern.'

A painfully direct statement, if not an ironic one, as Ougi-kun took the problematic letter away from me — all I have left is the

mummified paw.

It really looks like part of a figure now — when compared to the riddle-like letter that came out of nowhere.

‘Riddle-like… or maybe the letter itself is a riddle.’

‘Hm? What do you mean?’

‘Nothing. It’s just that the paper looked quite old, and the faded ink also suggests its age… from its condition, I can deduce that this wasn’t just written before Suruga-senpai was in high school, it was written before you were born.’

Hmm.

Spoken like a specialist.

About that, though he might be an amateur, I guess as Oshino Meme’s nephew, it runs in the family — I just thought the paper was dirty and the handwriting illegible.

Difficult to decipher, and once read, reeked of extraordinary repulsion; honestly, I felt deceived.

Yet — for ‘that person’, it was also completely in character.

Which was probably something only I’m privy to, beyond Ougi-kun’s ken even with his detective abilities… hmm, if it really was from ‘that person’, such creepy, unsettling poetry wouldn’t be out of the ordinary.

For that poem to be picked out by the mummified left hand through the fusuma means it’s something special — Ougi-kun may have suggested it ‘slipped into the fusuma via a gap’, but I hardly agree.

Fusuma don’t normally have gaps.

And even if they do, myself aside, Araragi-senpai would’ve noticed it when he was cleaning my room — on top of that, for a hygiene freak, a fault like that would have hardly escaped him.

‘Hm. Then it must’ve been placed in there deliberately. Sounds like one of those stories where a princess puts a love letter inside a panel to feel like their prince charming is always next to them… I wonder if that’s what’s going on here?’

‘If it were a love letter, it’d be quite romantic… but to think that the room I live in has a sheet of fusuma with what is basically a curse, that scares me a little.’

‘What scares me as your junior is to see my esteemed senior living in such a dumpster heap. What if there’s an earthquake?’

Faced with such direct concern, I’m left with no words. There he was talking about my human side, but only now he’s speaking his mind. However, it is true. Bibliophiles often say they ‘wish to die crushed by a pile of books’, but if I were flattened under a tower of BL novels, it’d be awkward for grandpa and grandma mourning me.

‘Oh, and Suruga-senpai, it’s a “set” of fusuma.’

‘“Set”?… I mean, I’m impressed by your trivia, Ougi-kun, but surely “sheet” would suffice?’

‘Well, fusuma themselves come in sets, so I would prefer if the traditional terminology is used. Suruga-senpai said “a sheet of fusuma”, but there could be more than one. Maybe there are letters in all those other fusuma.’

Classifiers aside, he was right on the money — there’s no reason to conclude that this was the only letter.

If they couldn’t be hidden in the shōji… then, there’s eight fusuma in my room, including the cabinets. Although they’re barely visible what with my mountains of trash… that said, even if I can see them, I couldn’t see what’s inside.

And even then, there’s no way I am going to break open every one just to see if there’s a letter in them… if memory serves me correct, each fusuma looked to have a really classy painting on it and looked very valuable.

An accident’s an accident, but breaking fusuma on purpose? No,

never. Besides, it'd never end.

Regardless of the results, the next logical thought would be to consider the fusuma in all the other rooms. With the Kanbaru household a traditional Japanese one, it'd take forever to go through every single one.

'Yeah. They're probably not something you break willy-nilly — it'd be great if we could go about it non-destructively, but I don't think taking them outside and letting the sun shine through would reveal much. Sorry I couldn't be of use; it'd be great if I had X-ray vision.'

'No, well, you don't have to apologise for that.'

'Ah, but maybe it's a latent power of mine that I'm not aware of. Let's give it a go. Suruga-senpai, you're wearing a bra with pink and white stripes, right?'

'No, it's turquoise today… hey, why do you want to know what underwear your seniors wear?'

Without knowing if this junior was being serious, I responded with wide-eyed bewilderment, which he followed with 'Ha-ha. Well, we'll leave what's in the other fusuma aside for later', giving a light chuckle.

'For now, let's dive into this letter. That way, maybe we could see something — you know who wrote this, right, Suruga-senpai?'

'……'

Well, it's not really a secret, and from the way Ougi-kun asked, it seems like he managed to guess it too.

Seriously, how much does this kid know? He even knows what the proper counter noun for a fusuma is. Sometimes I feel like he's as infinitely knowledgeable as Hanekawa-senpai.

'I don't know anything — you're the one who knows, Suruga-senpai.'

Those abyssal, pitch-black eyes compelled me; even though I didn't

really want to, I replied, as calmly as I could:

‘Kanbaru Tooe — née Gaen. This letter was penned by my mother.’

I mentioned it as the maiden name, but I'm not sure if that person even registered with the eldest son of the Kanbaru family.

With everyone opposing their union, especially from the Kanbaru family, my mum and dad eloped and practically exiled themselves to the depths of Kyushu, where they perished in a traffic accident, and their only child — me, that is — was then brought up in the Kanbaru household.

I know of all this virtually only from the Kanbaru side, so when it comes to comprehending this sequence of events, I wouldn't say I'm ready yet. Same goes for the swindler not long ago — I'm still sceptical as to how much of the stuff he said was true.

He's a swindler, after all.

So I try not to say anything about it. There is only one thing I can be certain: my mother — that is, Gaen Tooe — was, and is, in death as in life, hated and unforgiven by the Kanbaru household.

'Ha-ha. Well, I would think so too. To seduce the heir, yank him out of a traditional familial system, then to elope together and take him to the grave, I can quite understand their hatred.'

'Seduce', 'elope', 'take him to the grave', Ougi-kun's bias is slipping; although when he puts it that bluntly, it feels quite cathartic to me. Much better than being all sensitive and avoiding the subject.

'Hm? Does that mean Suruga-senpai is the heir now? Then if I marry into the Kanbaru household in the future, I would have to shoulder this responsibility too…'

'No.'

Two letters, a clear and simple denial.

You're in too deep, Ougi-kun.

Stop it.

‘Hm. But then that’d still be weird. If Suruga-senpai’s mother was the one who wrote the letter, it being in the fusuma aside, it wouldn’t be strange for her letters to be in the Kanbaru house… was what I was about to accept, but with this backstory, your mother should have already been barred from the Kanbaru house altogether.’

‘Barred… don’t say it like it’s the audio commentaries.’

An insider’s retort, as I spun the paw on my hand — the monkey’s paw held by my hand.

This mummy, too, was something left by that person — Gaen Tooe.

To see the mummy like this when it should’ve been thrown away was a surprise to me, but on the other hand, considering this once belonged to Gaen Tooe, it becomes much less of a surprise.

Ougi-kun may appear confused, but a letter of hers appearing in the house she’s barred in isn’t out of place for me at all — same goes for the hand grabbing the letter in the fusuma…

‘Hm… as a boy, I wouldn’t know much about how teenage girls think about their mothers. But I guess the same can be said for Senjougahara-senpai and Hanekawa-senpai.’

‘…Ougi-kun, you mentioned dowry earlier, but before things went completely south, it’s still conceivable for my mother to gift the fusuma to the Kanbaru household.’

‘I see, I see. That way, the question becomes if the Kanbaru household would even use these… but then again, objects themselves carry no sin.’

I was about to say my mum had no sins either, but it’s difficult to tell for sure. Objects may carry no sin only because they are too valuable, and therefore are not worth destroying or discarding, an obstacle when ‘cleaning up’.

But now that the daughter’s broken it…

‘If we only focus on “a hidden letter”, this looks awfully like Edgar Allan Poe’s “The Purloined Letter”… but that cipher’s difficulty reminds me more of “The Gold-Bug”, no?’

Spoken like a true fan of his.

I’ve read my share of books as a high-schooler, but mystery stories are a weak spot of mine, so I had no idea what he was saying… though I have at least heard of the name. I think that was where Japanese mystery author Edogawa Ranpo got his pen name from?

‘It’s more than the source of a pen name, Poe was the one who established the mystery genre. We have him to thank for today’s detective fiction scene.’

‘I see…’

No, I don’t see it.

Anyway, so Ougi-kun’s saying the letter’s a cipher? I haven’t read it, but “The Gold-Bug” certainly sounds like that kind of story.

Although I haven’t a clue why my mother would hide the cipher in a fusuma — then again, I haven’t a clue of anything about that person.

‘Well, well, it must mean something though. Because that person wouldn’t do anything without a reason behind it.’

‘Why’re you talking about my mother all of a sudden? All I have to do is to make a retort, right?’

‘Moving on, should we do some of the stuff written on this letter? It looks more like brown paper now though… Suruga-senpai, trying gathering your chest a bit.’

‘Okay, the chest, like this? Hey, hold on a second!’

I can’t set myself up!

Of all the lines he could’ve picked, why *that*? — he may look serious, but this junior is full of perverted thoughts.

Then again, juniors take off after their seniors.

‘Well, if you don’t want to, you can tighten your abdominals instead.’

‘What is it with you and girls’ abdominals?’

Besides, it’s not ‘tighten’, it’s ‘occupy’. [1]

And even then, if he asked me to ‘blend the brains’ or to ‘increase the teeth’, I’d have no idea where to begin… let alone ‘seize it of life, gouge out its soul’.

In the end, I just thought this was a series of frightening sentences… an assorted list of human body parts, with chilling descriptions…

‘No no, it’s not an assortment; some bits are missing, no? Even if you somehow manage to collect all the parts, you can’t make a human out of ’em. The obvious parts are listed out, but there’s plenty missing.’

‘Hm, well, something like that I guess…’

Mm?

Parts? Collection? Where have I heard that before…

I lowered my head and looked towards my hand.

The mummy. The mummified left hand. Part of a monkey. A part.

The collector — Numachi Rouka.

‘……’

‘Oh? Oho? Ohohohoho? Suruga-senpai, what’s with the sudden silence? If you think of something, then consult it with me. I love consulting with people.’

‘Uh… no, Ougi-kun, you’ve just, the, that mystery story that you mentioned.’

‘Mm hmm. “The Gold-Bug”, right?’

‘What kind of cipher was there? If it’s detective fiction, was it the name of whoever did it?’

‘No, that’d be incorrect. “The Gold-Bug” is also an adventure story, so the cipher points to where Captain Kidd hid his treasure. Hm? So your mother hid her possessions and this letter would be the key to where they are? Is that what you’re thinking?’

How am I supposed to answer Ougi-kun as that person’s daughter? I couldn’t know it then and there — yes, I guess you can call it possessions, or a treasure for that matter.

A legacy from Gaen Tooe.

A legacy, but with no beneficiaries.

Any wish one wanted, limited to three.

If this letter is a cipher that pointed towards the location of the rest of the mummified parts, then…

‘Aha. If we’re talking about “The Monkey’s Paw”, it’d be remiss not to talk about Jacobs. Poe was also known as a titan of horror stories, so it might be better to link the two together.’

Even with my theory, Ougi-kun continued without a hint of caution. To establish the mystery genre while being an adventure writer, and to also be a titan of horror fiction… an outstandingly talented man he must’ve been, Edgar Allan Poe.

Then again, this was before the days when genres were codified, so people probably had free rein back then. There’s a lot of turf war going on between sci-fi, fantasy and light novels these days, and it’d probably be quite difficult to be successful in all three.

Any work of fiction can have its own interpretation — a statement that rings quite hollow these days.

Between all that, I do hope there’s only one way to read the cipher. But if my hunch is right, then I can’t say for sure.

I even wish someone would just say ‘no’ to all this contrived thinking, but the ever-loyal Ougi-kun only responded with a ‘Well, the mummified hand did grab it, so it wouldn’t be much of a surprise if this led to the mummy’s location’ in agreement.

Reluctant as I am to say this to my junior, I think I’m being spoiled by him… I need a good dose of self-discipline.

‘With that said, reading it literally doesn’t seem a solution. It’s missing a lot of parts, and mummies don’t have brains or muscles.’

Hm.

Not only a lack of, but also an excess…

But, following this, there are words that call upon the reader to search for something: ‘collect’, ‘store’, ‘absorb’… that much is for certain.

Might that be the crux of the letter…?

‘Let’s do a bit of memory jogging. Suruga-senpai, how much of the mummified monkey did the loli slave vampire end up eating back then?’

‘Lemme see…’

Let’s include the left arm for now… no, that Numachi collected about just over half the parts back then — and then there’s also the head from that swindler.

Some Lord Devil she was, for Numachi to collect all that on her own, but even with this much, it’s nowhere near a full monkey.

The remaining unknown parts remain scattered across the entire country — without responsibility, without caution.

‘Perhaps even now, still granting some poor soul their wish… selfish wishes for their own happiness.’

Ougi-kun said jovially — a rather uncaring response, but as someone who made that selfish wish herself, I’m not qualified to give him a talking to.

With that feeling of shame, I stayed silent.

‘Ah, but now the letter itself is practically meaningless.’

Ougi-kun continued.

Hm? What? Meaningless?

I shot a curious glance at him as he carried on.

‘Because, putting aside why this letter was placed inside the fusuma, the age of this letter definitely places it before Suruga-senpai’s birth. It’s difficult to imagine all the parts still being where they were.’

He’s right.

For instance, all the parts Numachi collected over these years means those parts are no longer where they used to be… just as a treasure hunter must bear in mind the risk of 'getting beaten to it'.

Considering the time, this cipher was probably written about twenty years ago; it'd be natural to think the mummy had been lost — Ougi-kun's right, it's inconceivable for all the parts to have remained where they were.

But on the flip side, it's also difficult to imagine all the parts getting lost — the probability of a certain part still being where it was indicated on the cipher is not zero.

'Practically meaningless' is putting it too strongly.

'Dear me. Suruga-senpai, you're not thinking of deciphering the letter and collecting all the mummy parts, are you? I can't support that decision. Didn't you say last time that you wouldn't follow in Numachi-san's footsteps and become a collector yourself?'

'I did say that… not sure if I told you before though.'

Well, if he knows, then that means I've told him.

Ougi-kun continued what appeared to be a lecture to his senior, seemingly seizing on the opportunity.

'Suruga-senpai, don't you have a lot of other stuff to do? Cleaning your room, studying for exams, training for your return in university, those should be what's important. Despite this, despite now being the summer break, you want to go out and collect insects, no, collect mummies, you're the stupidest.'

'St-stupidest…'

'An absolute cretin — what a fool. I've heard of students tidying their rooms because they didn't want to study for exams and wanted a break from reality, but I've never heard of a student who wanted to go out because they didn't want to tidy their room; besides, that's a whole new level of laziness.'

Ougi-kun went on a further offensive.

I feel a rising urge to punch this junior of mine, but he's right. There's no time for all this. Or for punching juniors, for that matter.

I don't want to become the next Lord Devil like Numachi, and it never crossed my mind to clean up Gaen Tooe's — my mother's mess as her daughter; one mummy is not going to change that.

Of course, it's unforgettable, and it's something I don't want to forget, but I've decided to look towards the future, to treat all this as done and dusted — I won't look back towards these legacies, these negative legacies.

…It's just that, when it all becomes visible, becomes tangible, I couldn't just look the other way; truthfully, I haven't fully let things go.

'No, no, seriously, is this all right? Just rip it up and throw it away, it's been the source of all your troubles, hasn't it? — it's precisely storing up stuff like this that multiplies your misfortunes, birthing a darkness such as myself.'

'"A darkness such as myself"?'

'Nothing.'

Nothing, it seems.

'Right then, you keep on cleaning your room, you busybody Suruga-senpai. Even as people around the country make their own selfish wishes, even as they get struck down into a well of misfortune they can never hope to claw back up from, they've got nothing to do with you. Even as one person makes a thoughtless wish and endangers everyone around them, you don't need to care about it at all. Maybe you're right in thinking that your precaution would've saved lives, but is it worth pulling off this matricide for justice every time the occasion arises? Such is the situation. It's alright, even if Araragi-senpai looks down on your newfound, self-centred attitude, I'll always be on your side.'

'…Matricide for justice?'

I can't help but show a wry smile.

Matricide.

That word might’ve accidentally hit the nail on the head.

008

Ah well, now that the cipher's in front of us, it wouldn't do much harm if we tried to read it. With that thought, I set off reading my mother's letter in detail.

It's more likely that I'm the first person reading this letter, but given its miraculous appearance at miraculous timing, it'd be an utter waste if I just tore and threw it away. So let's get cracking.

'Oh, so you're studying it? What a surprise. Compared to someone somewhere wasting away their life because they did this to themselves, cleaning up your room and leading a cushy life seems more a priority, Suruga-senpai.'

Ougi-kun went on obstinately, but who cares — though come to think of it, this miracle wouldn't have happened without him being there.

Without him, I would've completely ignored the mummy and left it at that…

Really good at fanning the flames, this fanboy of mine. {C}

'Then let us quiet down and give it some thought. Mind if I sat?'

'Mm? Oh, I don't mind. Free up some space for yourself.'

'No, I meant if it's all right I sat on Suruga-senpai's legs.'

'I would mind that very much.'

Ougi-kun replied with an unexpected 'Aw, is that so~', as he dejectedly kicked off things around him and made himself some room.

I did the same. With my hands, not my feet.

'The less stuff, the better of course. The only reason why you didn't notice this letter until now was because your room's in such a mess,

Suruga-senpai.'

'Look, even if you have the best cleaners in the room, I don't think the letter in the fusuma would've been found… no, you'd probably be right to call it a complex. I place a lot of importance on feelings; not that good at letting things go.'

'That emphasis on feelings is what made you the only person within Senjougahara-senpai's middle school group of friends still in close contact with her, so it has its ups and downs. I think we should spend more time not on thinking how to throw stuff away, but on thinking how to create more space.'

'To create space… wise words indeed.'

'Yes. A Space Creator.'

'A-and who would that be?'

'Ichirizuka Konomi-san, of course', came the obnoxiously obscure answer, as Ougi-kun sat *seiza* on the exposed tatami mat. {D}

This guy only has his manners to save him…

To be impeccable as long as he doesn't utter a word… in a way, I'm impressed.

Whilst I turned from exasperated to impressed, I sat my legs wherever's convenient — not because I didn't like pins and needles, but because I couldn't find enough room for them.

In the end, 'wherever' was not a relaxing stance; my posture looked like a jigsaw piece, a rather advanced stretching position.

'Now then, there are many ways of deciphering a text, but I've no idea which one's more suitable. What do you think, Suruga-senpai?'

'Even if you ask me like that…'

Ill-versed in detective fiction, I had nothing much to offer — I didn't even know there could be all kinds of ways in cracking a code.

Is there a system to all this?

‘Well, we’ve mentioned this before, but this doesn’t look like something you read literally…’

Despite the imperatives, it’s an impossible order — most of the acts, if carried out, would make one a mass murderer.

‘No, but Suruga-senpai, some of these are still feasible. For instance, this one, “gather the chest”.’

‘Okay, the chest, like this? Wait, we’ve been through this before!’

‘I can’t believe you fell for it twice… quite the commitment to fanservice. I should’ve asked you to “stack the skin” if I’d known. How pure of heart I am.’

A laid-back response (laid-back, but a hell of a line), as he held the letter in front of his face, gazing at it less than a centimetre from his eyes. He couldn’t read like that, could he? Although he might not be reading at all; could he be examining the material or the impression?

‘Looks like cotton paper to me. Typical for the time. Feels like she just grabbed a sheet lying around and scribbled it down with a ballpoint — no envelope, just a quick fold, and in the fusuma it went; sloppy, if not crude.’

Is what Ougi-kun doing known as ‘profiling’? Well, as far as my mother’s personality goes, he’s not far off with ‘sloppy’ and ‘crude’.

‘But to hide a letter in a fusuma doesn’t seem like a crude act… if anything, it sounds quite delicate, no?’

‘Hmmm, it’s hard to say. As gingerly as she may have put it in, to disassemble and reassemble an age-old fusuma is nothing short of sacrilegious and violent.’

‘Mm, is that so? Well, either way, we’re the ones who broke the fusuma, so I don’t think there’s a point in us talking about being violent.’

‘Come on, Suruga-senpai’s the one and only culprit. Don’t drag me down with you, please.’

Loyal, but not chauvinistic — I mean, I did throw out the monkey’s paw, but take some responsibility for yourself, man.

‘Right, well, let’s not argue over the fusuma, and focus on the cipher.’

With that evasive remark, Ougi-kun finally looked away from the cotton paper to me — I exchanged the monkey’s paw for the letter.

Hmmm.

Now that I’m holding the physical object, the text or cipher aside, the age of the paper plus the handwriting makes it difficult to read… and I feel like if I treated it roughly, I’d tear it, so I handled it with trepidation.

Let’s just go through what we know so far… it lists all sorts of body parts, but doesn’t list them all… the imperatives order people to do all sorts of things, but all of them are variations of collecting… right?

Such was my assumption, but from that, there’re no signs that this cipher points to where the mummy parts are.

‘Suruga-senpai, keep on reading, but listen to this: I’ve got a theory.’

‘Hm? What is it, pray tell?’

‘By listing but not listing them all… is this subtraction?’

‘Subtraction? Well, that’s a headache. Sciences aren’t my strong suit.’

‘If subtraction was a subject, then there wouldn’t be subjects at all’, Ougi-kun said dryly — well, I do appreciate him lightening up the mood.

‘So, what did you mean by subtraction?’

‘Eh, in other words, I’m assuming what’s important is not what’s written, but what’s *not* written. For instance, if I list the Chinese zodiac but left ‘ox’ out, then the assumption wouldn’t be the eleven other animals are important; rather, ‘ox’ would be the important one, right? Something like that.’

Hm. I see, the key lies not in what’s written, but what’s *not* written, huh — not something I could have thought up on my own, but it could be the case.

‘So, Suruga-senpai, you keep on reading, but would you mind turning your buttocks towards me? I’d like to admire it.’

‘Okay. Towards you, right?’

‘And write my name with them.’

‘Okay, I’ll just write your name with… how am I supposed to do that!?’

What is this, some kind of mating ritual!?

‘This is ridiculous! What kind of level are you operating at, asking your senior to set herself up like that! What do you mean “you keep on reading” anyway?’

‘I mean, you were all compliant the first time round; you’re just asking for a second, aren’t you? Besides, in terms of setting each other up, you’re as guilty of it as I am — well, either way, it seems like it’s got nothing to do with bottoms.’

‘That from making your senior strike a cougar pose? Hey, at least say something more constructive now that you’ve seen my butt.’

‘That sight was so breathtaking, I want to construct a viewing platform just for it. That said, the butt is technically part of the hip, I guess. Looking at it from that point of view, maybe you can say the cipher includes all body parts.’

‘Does it now… throwing aside viewing angles for my butt, that’d make thinking about subtraction quite difficult.’

I felt like facepalming.

A prickly jesting junior on one side, a thorny malevolent mother on the other; I couldn't deal with them both at once — in the end, I'm not the brightest kid around these parts. I barely got into Naoetsu High School in that entrance exam.

Hanekawa-senpai might be able to solve this in an instant — Senjougahara-senpai, on the other hand, might've not cared at all. 'If you have something to say, say it', she'd say.

As for Araragi-senpai…

'I don't know what Araragi-senpai would've done, but you saying that senpai big-tits would've solved it instantly hurts my pride — I'm taking this as a provocation.'

Ougi-kun said.

Mm.

Which means Ougi-kun sees Hanekawa-senpai as a rival. I do find him stepping over the line sometimes, so I wanted to lecture him a bit, but to see Hanekawa-senpai as a rival is something I never could've have done, so I kept my mouth shut for a while.

'I could solve this cipher in an instant too if I put my mind to it, you know. I just thought it'd kill suspense, so I left little crumbs here and there. You do realise there's a shortcut, right?'

'Huh. Well, I'd be grateful if you… took that shortcut?'

I half-asked, doubts running through my mind.

I'll just indulge him for now. Yet even with that thought, I'm still filled with anticipation. Perhaps this mysterious junior knows a solution after all. What tricks does he has up his sleeve today?

'If you do get it right, I can write your name with my butt.'

'That'd haunt me for life if you followed through, so no thanks. My pride would be plenty satisfied if you said something like "Wow,

you're amazing, Ougi-kun!"'

Hmmm.

The humility — and from that, the confidence. My doubts from before certainly subsided. But even then, I'm still a bit worried.

'Then —'

As I thought, Ougi-kun cleared his throat even though he didn't need to, and raised his left hand — itself holding the monkey's paw — towards the ceiling.

'O Monkey's Paw! Aid me, please, in solving this riddle…'

'Wow, you're amazing, Ougi-kun!'

A word of praise from my mouth, a flying fist from my arm.

With the full force of a top-class athlete, I landed an almighty punch on him — lucky for Ougi-kun, the mountain of trash behind him cushioned his landing, so he doesn't look hurt.

I guess *some* good can come from an unkempt room… no, even if he's not injured, I can't be sure if he's fine. It could be something odd — an oddity.

W-well? H-has the wish been accepted? Has the monkey's paw listened or not? He only got halfway there… I hope I managed to cancel it, but…

'Ow, that hurt. What was that for, Suruga-senpai? I thought I was going to die.'

Complaints came pouring from Ougi-kun's mouth, but he didn't seem hurt as he got up — is that a grin on his face? How much of a masochist are you?

'O-Ougi-kun, d-do you know what you just did?'

'But of course. I am born of self-awareness. All I did was make a heartfelt wish with a convenient magical object that can grant

wishes. Now, let's see what happens…'

'Self-awareness, more like self-destruction…'

I've probably said this many times before, but this junior terrifies me.

I picked up the mummified left hand Ougi-kun dropped when I punched him — no visible changes thus far.

Let me see… according to the specialist, Oshino Meme, this monkey's paw… this devil's paw, may be claimed to 'fulfil any wish', but in reality, only responds to the negative side of the human's wish.

Taking the flip side beneath a person's wish — in other words, a devil whose inside is identical to its outside.

…Though bestowed with this horrifying characteristic, it was also good news.

Never mind insides and outsides, Ougi-kun's practically hollow. Even though he made his wish, there's no way the devil would make it come true, right? This junior may say it was from the heart, but it's hard to say if he has one in the first place…

But then again, this is only what I wanted to be true.

Fantastical uneducated guesses.

A wish made not from malice, but from darkness… it wouldn't surprise me if that paw went ahead.

'A-anyway, how was it? Ougi-kun. Any light bulbs flashing in your head?'

'Sadly, nope, nothing changed. It's all still in the thicket — sorry, in the thickest depths.' {E}

I see — then perhaps that's confirmation that the wish wasn't acted upon. But back when I made my wishes, the response wasn't immediate either… I shouldn't reach a conclusion so hastily.

What's dangerous is when one turns off their consciousness, when night falls — when the inner self surfaces.

The inner Oshino Ougi, huh…

'Ha-ha. What a waste of a wish.'

'It could be your life you're wasting… you rock star.'

Whatever should I do?

Should I discuss this incident with Araragi-senpai? I might as well make up with him for good measure, but I still have a shred of dignity to maintain as a junior.

To always look for Araragi-senpai to bail me out means I'll never grow. People cannot save others.

People can only save themselves.

'Ha-ha. My uncle's catchphrase. In that case, I also think that people can only save themselves, so please, Suruga-senpai, leave someone like me behind and go pursue your own happiness.'

'You've got a really sharp tongue… I can't possibly leave you behind now, can I?'

'Ohh, how nice of you.'

He exhaled as he stretched out both arms.

The body language screamed 'this senior's really falling for it'; instead of 'how nice of you', might it be more accurate to say it was 'how easy of you'? [2]

Now's not the time for word games, though.

Maybe it's true that 'people can only save themselves', but I couldn't just sit and watch my junior walk his path of self-destruction.

Luckily, even if Ougi-kun's meagre wish was acted upon, I know

how to solve this — this came from the specialists, so it should apply here too.

There's an inside and outside to countering the devil's hand — prove the wish is impossible, or achieve the wish before the devil does.

In essence, void the contract and render it impossible.

The situation we're in calls for the latter.

Which means, before the devil cracks the cipher, I'll have to crack the cipher with Ougi-kun, so that the devil wouldn't possess Ougi-kun's body.

What was originally supposed to be a light challenge has become something considerably more precarious… I never thought all this would come from just cleaning my room.

Perhaps this was what Araragi felt last year as well. Maybe it's a responsibility every senior takes.

'Mm.'

Ougi made a noise. A thinking noise, it seems.

'Excuse me, Suruga-senpai, mind if I had a look at that?'

With him buried in the trash pile, he pointed with his toe — a stark contrast from his polite language, and definitely *not* the way you should address your senior; I looked towards where he was pointing, and it was the letter I placed on the tatami mat when I was picking up the monkey's paw.

Sheets of paper lie either on their front or back, there's nothing off about it, right? We should've checked it thoroughly.

'Nope. I noticed something now that it's flipped over. Mind passing it over with your foot?'

'Why the foot…?'

That said, there could be some meaning behind that odd request, so I lifted the letter up, being careful not to damage it, placing it between my big and index toes (like a claw machine) and passed it to Ougi-kun.

Ougi-kun also met me with his foot.

What kind of interaction is this?

‘Fwoosh～’

There’s probably no deeper meaning to this (seems he only wanted to exchange stuff with each other’s feet; what kind of fetish is that?). Ougi-kun took the letter into his hands, and started examining it again.

Only this time, on its back.

‘Hmm…’

‘What’s the matter? Is there another message on the back?’

‘No, but I was thinking that might be the case, so I had a look, but alas. However, be it cleaning or deciphering, it is important to take physical action. In order to see through the paper from the other side, I flattened it, and found something new on the front. It’s in the corner, covered by a wrinkle.’

‘A wrinkle?’

I looked at his land, and lo… it wasn’t a fold from eons ago, but a wrinkle caused by the mummified left hand grabbing the letter.

Now that the paper’s flat, I can also make out the illegible characters… quite careless of me, but in my defence, I didn’t want to damage the paper in any way, so I never thought about straightening the sheet at all.

In order to make it easier to inspect from the back, Ougi-kun straightened the paper without caring if it’ll get damaged, and thus a new message was found. Taking action is indeed important, it seems.

Although on top of the blurry handwriting and the wrinkle, there was one other reason why we didn’t notice this message until now.

Unlike the passage so far, this line was written solely in katakana:

ニゴリナキシカクヲヨメ

ni go ri na ki shi ka ku wo yo me

Read the unmuddied blind spot?

‘The only line in katakana, and the only line written away from all the others — looks to be something special indeed. *Shikaku* as in “blind spot”? Or “four-sided”, “qualification”, “assassin”… *yome* as in “to read”? Or “to recite”, “bride”, “night-vision”… “unmuddied” seems to be the only interpretation for *nigorinaki* though.’

Ougi-kun seems pleased for now, having found some hints to go on.

Which, considering how little these discoveries mean for the situation we’re in… well, someone’s easily amused.

But then again, it also speaks to how calm he is.

I jumped ahead and went for ‘read the unmuddied blind spot’, but it is true that every component can be interpreted differently…

But, no matter what, this line is undeniably different — even though it is an imperative like the others, it contains no body parts, and whether *yome* reads as ‘to recite’, ‘bride’, or ‘night vision’, none of them have anything to do with collecting (if it was ‘bride’ or ‘night vision’, it’s not even an imperative).

‘An imperative — alternatively, an interrogative.’

‘An interrogative?’

‘Yes. In any case, I was looking for any other possibilities, but my instinct would also go for “read the unmuddied blind spot” as you said. That is to say, when you read the unmuddied blind spot, you get the solution.’

An offhand remark, which made me think this was a classic plot device, but what exactly is ‘read the unmuddied blind spot’? If it’s a blind spot, sure it’s to be seen or to be hit?

Even if this was an interrogative, I’m still stumped.

It could even be completely unrelated to the rest of the cipher —

plus, it being all in katakana meant I couldn't discern whether it was my mother's handwriting, even as her daughter.

The characters are all too simple, so any quirks are difficult to see.

If not left out.

If the cipher was written with whatever paper she got her hands on, then it wouldn't be strange for her to write something unrelated somewhere else on the sheet…

Well, I say all that, now that something that looked like a hint has appeared, I couldn't just ignore it — having stood up to punch Ougi-kun previously, I consciously sat back down once again.

Ougi-kun also reverted to sitting *seiza*.

In terms of posture, his *seiza* is textbook.

'By blind spot, does that mean "a place that can't be seen"? Were we along the right lines when we assumed the clues lie outside the passage?'

Whilst not deserving of a retort, it's something worth saving for later, although this assumption is worth pursuing.

'Uh huh. Then we need to re-examine things again. Suruga-senpai, buttocks.'

'No curtness. No curt instructions, either. Don't just say "buttocks" like a surgeon asking an assistant for a scalpel. I'm not doing it.'

Things are different now. This is after Ougi-kun made that wish on that monkey's paw — he's still grinning and completely oblivious, but we are now forced into a situation where solving the cipher is a must.

'Well, when your mother was writing, she probably didn't have your arse in mind.'

With some out of left field logic, Ougi-kun ended this lengthy tangent on my buttocks — he's unreadable, I swear.

Even though he says that, mothers shouldn't let their daughters be trapped in situations like these, right? But a situation like this is probably beyond the imagination of Gaen Tooe — that person is no prophet.

'From where I'm sitting, the Gaens all seem to be prophets.'

'What?'

'No, no, nothing at all.'

'Is it really? You sound like you know my mother more than I do…'

'I don't know anything — you're the one who knows, Suruga-senpai. Especially —'

Ougi-kun said whilst handing back the letter to me. I kept the paw with me this time — it's too dangerous for him to toy with. Even if he understood the situation we're in, I can't say for certain he wouldn't make some other wish about my butt.

'— Especially for someone as important as Gaen Tooe, for her to die in a mere traffic accident? It's so unbelievable it makes you think…'

'…Uh', I uttered, but I don't have anything else to say. As important my mother may be, she's not an immortal vampire; she could still die from a traffic accident.

That's that.

Right?

'Hmm, I wonder… it just doesn't seem a fitting way to go — well, either way, I do wish to follow in your father's footsteps in capturing Gaen Tooe's heart — just as I want Suruga-senpai's heart in mint condition.'

'M-mint condition?'

I thought all he wanted was my affection. {F}

It may not be about the mummified monkey's paw, but what does

he have in mind for my body then?

As I felt alienated by Ougi-kun once again, I re-read the cipher on my hand, from top to bottom.

Nigorinakishikaku… [Unmuddied blind-spots…]

'Unmuddied', would that be in the sense of 'clean' or 'clear'…? However, something to do with purity would be a far cry from collection-related terms like 'assemble', 'combine', and 'gather'.

A contradiction between the riddle's text and the riddle itself… though given this is a cipher, that contradiction might be the hook itself.

'Muddy… cloudy. Could it be *nigorizake*?'

Ougi-kun interjected seriously for once.

'Well then, let's have a drink, you and I.'

'Even if you put on a serious face for once, I'm not falling for it. Why do I have to drink with *you* of all people? No booze allowed, you delinquent.'

That said, even if it wasn't *nigorizake*, there should still be plenty of muddy things that aren't blind spots. Being accommodating to the muddy and the clear seems suitable for coping with the supernatural; it's how Araragi-senpai has approached oddities and their phenomena so far.

For instance… isn't there a Japanese phrase that goes 'with unclouded eyes'?

'"Cloudy eyes" is also a phrase. You see, don't the eyeballs of a dead body turn grey and cloudy?'

'……'

A chilling statement from those pitch-black eyes…

You're a cloudy existence.

Couldn't you brighten up a little yourself?

'Remember those experiments in primary school where you made some cloudy white liquid… what's that, actually?'

'Cloudy white… doesn't sound related to me. But, and this isn't about the *nigorizake*, all I can think of when you mention "muddy" or "cloudy" is liquids and semi-liquids.'

'Yes, well, both their kanji [液 and 濁] share the "water" [氵] radical. Although I don't think soaking the letter in water would help us.'

'Mm, I think so too.'

If we had multiple takes, then it might be worth trying, but we can't un-soak the cipher if nothing happens. It could be more soluble than even oblaat.

'…To read the unreadable with unconcealed, unblurred, or unclouded eyes. Or is it asking us to adjust more than our mindsets? If that's the case, I'm too twisted a character to decipher this…'

Ougi-kun said, not disappointedly, but almost with glee in face of this pickle.

Definitely a masochist.

It's just if that deduction proves to be true, then I can't say I'm free of impurities either — at one point, an oddity, that is, a devil, blended in with my left arm.

'I might've previously interpreted "*nigorinaki*" as "*nigori-naki*", that is, "without cloudiness", but if the correct solution doesn't care for existing vocabulary, then there can be alternatives. "Cloudy weeping", for instance.'

When speaking of 'cloudy' or 'muddy', the first thing that comes to mind is usually along the lines of liquids, but Ougi-kun is approaching it with a pair of fresh eyes. Although it's probably not a phrase at all, tears are a mixture of molecules, so I guess you can call it 'cloudy' in the sense of having impurities.

‘And on that front, there’s loads of other possibilities. “Clouded cry”… “muddied tree”?’

‘“Muddied tree” sounds more like a stutter only a certain lost girl would say.’

‘“Cloudy gas”… “muddy period”. “Blurry mark”…’

The further we went, the more I felt like I was barking up the wrong tree — made-up words should’ve been a great idea, though.

No.

I’m mulling too much over this.

I might be an idiot, but to read this much into a single line is surely the wrong approach.

My mother may have been mysterious, but daughters take off after their mothers, and she’s not the thinking type either — she’s not the type to play the long game, but the type to just do things.

She’s not the type to think about ciphers like this — she’d prefer something simpler, something more direct.

Prefer… that’s it.

It might no longer be a game for us, but it’s still a game for that person — the cipher isn’t a security measure.

Even assuming this is the cipher that would lead us to the mummified parts, the point in time which she left the cipher makes me think she didn’t want to hide it at all.

A gruesome, macabre cipher seems more a product of morbid curiosity than a dark reflection of inhumanity… there’s nothing to be afraid of once you know there’s no need to take it seriously.

In other words, it’s a cipher written to interest the reader.

Which is still dangerous, of course — one may collect knives and swords ‘because they’re beautiful’, but the fact remains that they

are still weapons, and they can still be weapons.

With that said… if this cipher was indeed not written to secure, but for a laugh, for amusement, as an improvisation, then viewing it with slightly different, unclouded eyes could prove useful for a solution.

That's right.

Let's solve this like a mother and daughter solving a puzzle together.

Right as I found a new perspective to go on, or at least think I did, a vibrating sound came from Ougi-kun's pocket as an unwelcome splash of cold water.

'Ah, excuse me.'

Ougi-kun said, slickly flinging out his phone with a finger on the phone strap.

'Not a message, but a call. Oh my, it's Araragi-senpai.'

'!'

'Stuff here seems more important, so I'll just hang up on him. If it's really important on his end, he'll give me a text.'

'N-no, pick it up. I don't mind.'

I urged him while pretending to stay calm.

Having long ignored my texts, Araragi-senpai and I are now at an unexpected crossroads, and I am not letting it slide — then again, I can't just ask him to put me on the call.

'If you say so. But I say we don't tell him about the mummy and the cipher?'

'Mm, good point. Even if I'll discuss it with him after I'm done, I still want to solve this by myself… this might sound trivial in comparison, but it'd be great if you can gauge Araragi-senpai's

current mood for me.'

'Understood.'

My inexplicable request was met without question, as Ougi-kun stood up and connected the call.

'Hello, yes, Oshino Ougi speaking. Yeah, just causing trouble at Kanbaru-senpai's place — nooo, that's not the case at all. I wouldn't help her clean her room.'

Not only is he hiding the oddities, he's also hiding the messy room that caused all this in the first place.

Really thoughtful he is, this kid.

'Gathering her chest one moment, turning her butt against me the next, then punching me at full force, ha-ha, what a pervert…'

Oi, blabbermouth!

What if Araragi-senpai does decide to come here!?

'Mm hmm. That thing about Hanekawa-senpai? What's with missy big tits? Yes. Yes —'

Ougi-kun said as he lunged towards the corridor past the trash heap. What, am I not supposed to listen to this conversation? The thing with Hanekawa-senpai? Is that why he didn't want to pick up in the first place?

Either way, Ougi-kun left.

I felt abandoned, even though it's my own room.

So I guess even with a junior as rude as him, I'll miss him when he's gone… to distract myself from this newfound solitude (and the possibility of him bad-mouthing me with Araragi-senpai), I turned my gaze back to the cipher, resuming my theorising.

Let's see… the cipher itself, '*nigorinakishikakuwoyome*' was written only in katakana, which I guessed was to make it stand out, and it

seems I'm right on that front, but if you wanted a passage to stand out, surely there're other ways of going about it.

Like circling it, for instance, or underlining it; there's tons of ways to do it, actually — why *katakana*?

A reason for writing the riddle in katakana… was it integral? It can create multiple interpretations like 'cloudy weeping' or 'night-vision assassin', but still, *kata*kana…

Hm.

As I reflected on my decent deductions and waited for Ougi-kun to come back and discuss it over, I heard footsteps approaching.

Well, that was quick… I thought he left because he anticipated a lengthy call?

I looked up at the one who entered my mess of a room. It wasn't Ougi-kun.

The person entered the room like it was the most normal thing to do.

Stood in front of me was a teenage girl, donning a loose-fitting jersey, her brown hair heavily damaged, as if self-inflicted — with a cast on her leg.

010

‘…This isn’t just morbid now, this doesn’t even make sense. Can you just not, mum?’

Though agitated, I retained my composure, and spoke to her as flatly as I could.

‘Besides, I think this is the first time you showed up in the day.’

‘Hmph.’

The brown-haired girl gave a cynical smirk.

The same smirk as the girl in my memories, that middle school acquaintance, Numachi Rouka, but her tone says she’s someone different. Instead of the devil who’d work her back off to grow, she’s more like the devil who’d plot.

‘You don’t seem shocked at all; what a bore. How’d you figure? Was it friendship? Or was it kinship?’

Neither, really.

I wouldn’t say for sure it’s friendship that Numachi and I shared, let alone kinship being what my mother and I shared — the reason why I’m sure she wouldn’t show up here and now was more because I know she no longer has any regrets.

Unlike me.

‘Haunting my dreams not enough for you? Now you’re eating away at my reality? Mum, please. I’m going to have to visit the hospital now.’

‘Relax, Suruga. It has nothing to do with your head, and besides, I’m not a ghost. I only show up when you’re in a bind — think of me as a genie of sorts.’

A genie?

How fantastical…

In Numachi's guise, too. I can't take this.

Why? Is it the immorality? I felt strange.

'But I'm not in a bind.'

Well, no, I am, aren't I?

The room's in a mess, Araragi-senpai and I are in a mess, my clingy junior is turning me into a mess, and the cipher's still an unreadable mess.

Exams, rehab… okay, I *am* in a bind.

If anything, life hasn't gone smoothly at all.

'I've never understood the idea of "living life smoothly". Isn't life all about "not knowing how smoothly things will go"? Risk management, damage control… it's all subtraction.'

Subtraction.

If life is measured only in subtractions, a 'smooth' life appears difficult to conceive.

'Those living life at a hundred percent should be a rarity — hehehe. Mathematics a problem for you?'

'A problem… but now that you mention it, I'm not that good at studying in general. Same goes for Japanese… I hate riddles.'

I said, flippantly.

How should I put this, the act I'm putting on is less a rebellious teen giving her mum the cold shoulder, and more a pubescent teen trying to look cool in front of her mum.

'Mum, why leave this cipher for me?'

'What you really wanted to ask is why I left that mummy for you, isn't it?'

In a jersey, in the guise of a girl, with a Numachi Rouka-like smile, my mum pulled the mummified hand away from me. Maybe it's just me, but that paw looks like it's at home now.

In the hands of the collector, Numachi Rouka.

In the hands of its owner, Gaen Tooe.

The devil's abode.

'Or you could at least say that leaving this for you caused you a lot of trouble, no?'

'I wouldn't say that…'

The trouble the mummy caused isn't all my mother's fault. I'm not that shameless.

Besides — and allow me to say it, despite the misunderstanding it may cause, despite it sounding insensitive and bullish — I only got to meet Araragi-senpai and Senjougahara-senpai through that mummy.

'But I cannot say in good conscience that you left that for me out of goodwill. And even if that's the case, I wouldn't want to collect all the other bits.'

Even if you appeared in as nonsensical a fashion such as this, I don't plan on it — I said almost in defence, as I read the cipher again.

My mother responded with a grin, a mocking grin — a collector's grin.

'You don't need to carry on the will of "this kid". My negative legacies aren't for you to close either — that letter wasn't meant for you.'

She said.

'As you've noticed, it's something I gave your father alongside the fusuma. A love letter of sorts, I guess.'

‘Love letter…’

Ougi-kun did mention the story about hiding a love letter in a fusuma… but to gift fusuma *as* a love letter? That’s beyond rich, that’s just ostentatious.

‘It was from my teenage days, so I might have put too much character into it.’

‘…Like a middle schooler showing off the obscurest and hardest kanji they’ve learnt.’

I answered back, with my own attempt at cynicism.

‘As I was saying, teenage years. Can’t help but add a little flair.’

It fell on deaf ears.

‘I wanted to rid myself of the Gaen name, and that onii-chan wanted to rid himself of the Kanbaru name too — that’s probably what brought us together. He used these fusuma I gave him without revealing their origin, probably as a bit of vengeance against home.’

To bring up how my parents met all of a sudden felt indescribable, like overhearing a secret you’re not supposed to know.

Also, she calls father ‘onii-chan’?

I never thought of my mother as the younger sister type.

‘And then we really threw our families behind.’

‘……’

Throwing away everything until all they had was each other.

No, after that — between them, they had me.

‘Sadly, onii-chan never wised up to the letter. I was barred from here not long after, so I couldn’t get the fusuma back too. That’s all there is. A treasure map that didn’t serve its purpose, like a story that never blossomed, or a foreshadowing that never paid off.’

My mother said in conclusion.

I only realised just now, she may have appeared as my former rival to mess with me, but maybe the reason why she had to appear as someone else was because she couldn't appear as herself in the Kanbaru household.

Maybe it's some sort of barrier?

If she had to cross this barrier even if it meant appearing as someone else, that meant she had something to tell me, right?

'…So you *are* telling me to collect the mummified parts after all.'

'Are you still on about that? There's no need for you to do this. Here, I could take responsibility for once and tear this letter up for you. Although you should realise exactly how much danger you're in.'

With that, Gaen Tooe shrugged.

'How much danger? …I know that full well. Ougi-kun made a wish on accident. Seriously, being reckless has its limits — now I have to crack the cipher no matter what.'

It's the same recklessness Araragi-senpai had when he protected me.

'I'm not talking about that… though I guess that's also inevitably related. You're being too naïve around that boy.'

She said without hesitation.

To reckon my understanding of that teenage amalgamation of evil, that incarnation of destruction as naïve — my mother's probably the only person in the world who could say that. I have a grudging respect for her.

And to call him 'boy'.

'That scattered mummy, that mummy littered all over Japan — you have no idea of the misfortune my mummy has caused.'

And to call it ‘my mummy’.

An emphasis on her possession over it, though it also sounded as if Gaen Tooe *was* the mummy.

‘No, Ougi-kun understands that much at least. He’s explained it to me endlessly like some practical joke. Not only will a wish hurt the one who made it, it’ll also put everyone around them in harm’s way —’

‘It’ll be an endless tragedy.’

Gaen Tooe interrupted.

‘For the mummy feeds on wishes and misfortunes — it’ll replicate, like cancer cells do. Though I guess the real thing that’s multiplying are wishes, not cancer cells.’

Gaen Tooe said as she gave a Numachi Rouka-like shrug.

‘R-replicate? Uh…’

Caught aback, the paper fell out of my hand — more than that, I stood up without second thought.

I never thought of that.

But with that accusation, I’m more surprised I never figured out something so simple myself.

Yes, when I made a wish on the mummy, it responded in kind and ‘grew’ — an odd thing to happen for something supposedly dead; anyway, what was originally just a mummified paw had ‘extended’ down the elbow by the time the first wish was done.

With a second wish, it’d probably grow to the shoulder. The third would probably be something more.

‘Growth’ — ‘regenerate’?

Like cancer cells — like an undead vampire?

Erm… what exactly is going to happen?

Mummy parts, scattered all over the place… if it granted a wish to some fool like me somewhere around the world… not only would it hurt them and everyone around… it'd also regrow 'more than thrice'…?

Then the tragedy wouldn't end after three wishes; it'd just spread three times as fast, affecting three times the people?

Three times three makes nine? Nine times nine, eighty-one? Eighty-one times eighty-one… it's already beyond my mathematically-inept comprehension.

In doing so, if a mummy — originally more fragile than that sheet of paper — were to be scattered, misfortune would spread like a pathogen… eh?

Wait, that's weird.

Is that even possible?

With the mummified head from that swindler done and dusted, I would've thought the mummy itself was also taken care of… but now nothing seems to have been taken care of.

It would also explain why that mummified left hand, also originally dealt with, resurfaced in my room — if it'll regenerate and regrow indefinitely, then no matter how many left arms show up, there'd be no contradiction.

But why would a recently built-up pile of rubbish have a second mummified left hand I never knew about? The how is still a mystery to me, but at least I know why there's a second.

Even so, this solution is mere kindling for the next problem.

With that logic, even the head can regrow. I've heard that planarians could easily regenerate their brains, let alone oddities.

'Heh heh heh, too much for you? Well, I can offer some reassurance. We've got some trusty specialists on the case, so

nothing catastrophic would come up.'

She spoke as if my panicking was entertainment; or at least not how someone responsible for this should.

Specialists… like Oshino Meme or Kaiki Deishuu?

Kaiki Deishuu did have a mummified part… he probably got the head the same way I did, directly from the one responsible, but that doesn't mean it's the only part he has.

Full of untruths, swindlers.

'But it is true that some parts even the specialists can't find or recycle. I guess they're forever lost then — and even if they aren't, you're the only one who's able to find them.'

There's two ways of reading that.

One is that I can find them because I am Gaen Tooe's daughter; the other is that I am that fool who would accidentally find them and make a wish.

If it's the latter, then that's not reassuring at all. Parts that elude the experts, but not the fools?

Thinking of the worst imaginable outcome is rendering me speechless, but my mother showed no signs of regret even with her daughter like that — I would've thought someone so central to these tragedy-causing possessions might have a few suggestions, but then again, it's not a surprise if there weren't any.

Dead men tell no tales.

She really has no need for that negative, avoidant, cry-baby of a mummy — so I thought.

'Oh, that boy of darkness is about to make his return — well then, if you'll excuse me.'

'Eh?'

Are you going? — that was what ran through my head. I really am afraid of being alone, aren't I; even if it's my hopeless mother, I can't help but want to depend on them.

'If I ever met that boy, given my world view, it'd do me no good. I'll probably get annihilated.'

'Annihilated?'

She spoke as if Ougi-kun was anti-matter… no, dark-matter?

'Anyway, you're not obligated to carry on anybody's will or legacy, and nobody's expecting that obligation from you either — that's all I came here to say. For you aren't me, nor this girl, and definitely not Araragi-kun. If I may complain a little, you're always doing stuff using my name as an excuse, and I'm not cool with that. Do stuff out of your own will; if you're putting in the effort, put it in for yourself.'

'For myself…'

Just go and do it.

Feels like it's the first time my mother's ever encouraged me.

'Don't people call you Ganbaru Suruga-chan anyway?' [3]

'H-how did you know that nickname!?'

I came up with it myself in middle school!

'Mums know *everything* about their daughters — hehehe. Although I have to say, it's a bit of a muddied nickname.'

'Muddied…?'

Some kind of legendary genius she is, if she really sees even putting in effort as something impure — she's more than a strong character, she's practically *fierce*.

Which does mean, even if we're mother and daughter, she and I are two completely different people — yes.

Kanbaru Suruga and Gaen Tooe are two separate people.

Only now did I realise that fact.

Only now did I rediscover that fact.

‘Well, muddy or dirty, you do you. But if you’re just plain water, that wouldn’t sit well with me.’

‘Plain… water…’

‘If you can’t be medicine, be poison. Otherwise you’re nothing but water — ah yes. And so, if you ever get to meet him again, tell it to Kaiki-san too. Tell him to not become lost in trying to chase my shadow. There’s no need to worry about me, I’m all lovey-dovey with my husband over in that world.’

That’s impossible!

I mean, how am I supposed to bring it up with him!?

011

‘Apologies for the wait. I had a long talk with Araragi-senpai — though given the trouble senpai big-tits landed herself in, it’s to be expected. But it does give me a bit of a pickle; for once, in a time of need, I guess I’ll have to give them a minimal amount of help… oh, Suruga-senpai, what’s going on? You look at peace all of a sudden.’

Ougi-kun said while casually spinning his phone in his hand, as I palmed my cheeks to see if I looked like it. ‘No, nothing’, came my reply,

‘Had a little bit of daydreaming. Saw a couple faces I hadn’t seen in quite a while.’

‘Huh?’

Ougi responded with a face of incredulity.

Although he’s probably also making sure he had nothing to do with my change of composure.

‘Then let’s continue examining the cipher, Suruga-senpai’, he said.

‘…All’s well with the phone call? What did Araragi-senpai say?’

‘Ah, you don’t need to worry about him. Araragi-senpai’s not as mad as you think. The reason why you couldn’t contact him is because he’s in a spot of bother, as usual. Although this time it’s more Hanekawa-senpai getting into trouble than Araragi-senpai.’

The news that Araragi-senpai’s not as mad as I thought made me want to jump with joy, but I’m more concerned about ‘Hanekawa-senpai getting into trouble’.

Even though she’s the sort of person who’d never be bogged down, I cannot ignore that given that it happened overseas.

‘No, for the moment, it’d be better not to meddle. We’ll just have to wait and see — Araragi-senpai’s stuck between a rock and a hard

place. Given the situation senpai big-tits is in, helping her would probably end up backfiring.'

'……'

I feel like we're talking on very different scales here.

No, it is of a comparable scale — it does hint at the possibility that the mummy is reproducing itself all across the land.

'Well, anyway, when breasts get too big, they shake and bounce around and get too heavy, which is a pain for the one having them, so that's that.'

Ougi-kun summarised (not even remotely).

'So about the cipher, I was talking with that fool Araragi-senpai, when I thought up of a theory —'

Returning to the topic at hand.

But, with a 'ah, no need for theorising, Ougi-kun', I interrupted him.

'I've got it. I know what it says.'

'Eh?'

That deer in the headlights look from the boy of darkness was worth it — to have caught out this hollow incarnation was certainly no hollow victory for me. {G}

I say that, but it's nothing to gloat about. Ougi-kun was thinking about the cipher alongside me until halfway through, and if it weren't for that person dropping blatant hints in that daydream, an idiot like me would never have gotten the solution.

A lot of words may have been exchanged just now, but from her perspective, that cipher was written in jest, and she wouldn't have shown up if it weren't for me taking too long wracking my brains around for answers. That might be the unexpected truth from that daydream.

Yet I was trying to show off my authority as a senior against the constantly-smug Ougi-kun, so I pretended it was all me, as I struck a charismatic pose;

'First I thought of…'

Emphasising that this was all *my* work.

Which may end up a fool's errand, but Ougi-kun was completely devoted to being the audience, flashing his usual grin — as a mystery fan, he naturally likes playing the detective, but I guess he also doesn't mind playing Watson from time to time.

'Listing some, but not all body parts — you said this was to call attention to the parts that weren't written.'

'Indeed I did, but nothing much came of it.'

'Yes. We concluded by saying that, by interpreting it differently, it can be said to include all body parts, but regarding that, I think it's possible to invert that theory.'

'Invert?'

'In other words, within this list, only one or two sentences are important, with the rest being red herrings — the reason why not all the parts are listed is because there's no need to. As long as there

are enough extra sentences, they've served their purpose as distractions.'

It'd be too cumbersome if there were too many, I added, as I inadvertently eyed Ougi-kun's reaction.

'Ah, I see, so that's the one.'

He simply nodded.

So it's still a common type of cipher…

I thought I had made an original discovery.

'I don't believe it… I've even coined a new phrase for this kind of cipher, like "hiding in plain sight"…' {H}

'That phrase has been there for ages; quite often used in mystery fiction, actually.'

'Seriously? Hmmm, if only there was a phrase that describes how I feel right now…'

'Ah, that'd be "reinventing the wheel".'

So there is one.

Probably the only original thing about this scene is the audience outwitting the detective… I thought pensively as Ougi-kun egged me on.

'But it would be difficult to see which part of the passage actually matters, right?'

A sharp audience, a sharp junior.

'Wouldn't that be revealed in the riddle, "*nigorinakishikakuwoyome*"?'

'Ho ho. Then "*yome*" really is "read" then.'

'Mm. That's right. However, for "*nigorinakishikaku*", that part needs a bit more work.'

‘A bit more work?’

Ougi-kun said as he reread the sheet.

Having said that, he only skimmed — perhaps because he is now playing the audience, it’d be better not to accidentally discover the truth for now.

‘After rereading it, I still don’t know which parts of the passage stand out more. But from what Suruga-senpai’s been saying, that’d be a wrong approach, right?’

It always feels like he’s raising the bar… he may be warming me up, but this isn’t a role I’m used to playing, so I do hope he gives me some leeway.

This is different from the anxiety on the courts.

‘Let’s go through this step by step. The fact that this riddle was entirely in katakana caught my attention, and I was thinking while you’re on your call… when it comes to emphasising that line as the riddle, there’s no lack of options; you can even just write “Question” on top and draw a little rectangle around it.’

‘So that’s it, a quadrilateral. Seems like “*shikaku*” doesn’t mean blind spot after all…’

‘Ah, no, that’s not what I’m trying to say. Pure coincidence.’

My examples are a tangly mess.

The only thing I’ve shown off was how bad I was at this… I did want the competent junior to see his senior’s competent side, but I’d better wrap this up before the facade collapses.

‘In other words, Suruga-senpai’s saying that something about the cipher renders it necessary to write the riddle in katakana?’

‘Mm. I did also think at one point that this may have been coincidence, that someone else came in and wrote something unrelated.’

‘Because katakana’s so simple, you couldn’t tell for sure if it’s your mother’s hand?’

‘Precisely.’

He really scratches an itch with those remarks — I even think he’s known the truth all along, he’s just pretending not to out of pity.

‘But that is also not the case; the simplicity of katakana is key. The riddle is written in katakana *because* it’s so simple.’

‘Hmm…? I seem to be a bit slow… what does that mean? So, flipping it on its head, that means to write the riddle in kanji and hiragana would make it too complicated… fair enough, I wouldn’t want to write ‘muddy’ in kanji myself’, Ougi-kun said.

‘After all, since we’ve started having all these digital devices, humans don’t write as neatly anymore. But still, if the cipher has “ankle” [踝] in kanji, then “muddy” [濁] wouldn’t remotely be a challenge. Although just by looking at it, I have no idea how many strokes it has.’

‘That’s it.’

‘What?’

Overexuberance from an overperforming junior is something I, as an underperforming senior, had to latch on with any chance I have.

‘We should close in on the number of strokes.’

‘Number of strokes… if we’re talking “muddy”, that’d be sixteen, right?’

Wasn’t he saying he didn’t get it just a moment ago? — such astounding performance nearly made me respond as an audience would, but fortunately, the number of strokes for ‘muddy’ didn’t matter.

That was not the point.

‘I’m talking about the number of strokes of the katakana.’

‘The number of strokes of the katakana…? This, erm, well, I’ve never thought about that, have I?’

This should be right.

As mentioned, their simplicity means their number of strokes typically get ignored — but if they’re characters, they will have a number of strokes; no exceptions.

‘Well, they’re all one or two, aren’t they?’

‘Mm, most of them are. But there are katakana with three strokes — and of the forty-six kana there are, two of them require four strokes.’

‘Huh… so some of them need four strokes… wait, what?’

Ougi-kun raised his head all of a sudden.

If this is all an act, a fine actor he is. And so I responded, as dramatically as he did,

‘That’s right. Katakana with *four strokes* (四画, *shikaku*).’

Technically, there are more than two katakana that require four strokes; if we include the *dakuten*, then there would be plenty. [4] For example, with *dakuon*, カ (*ka*) becomes ガ (*ga*), and ス (*su*) becomes ズ (*zu*), and both go from two strokes to four.

But we don't need to think about that.

Because the '*nigorinakishikaku*' part translates as 'the four stroked characters without *nigoriten*' — with that, *dakuon* and *handakuon* were excluded in the first place. [5]

'Ha-ha. Can't believe I've missed that. With "muddy" mentioned, all I've been thinking of are liquids and semi-liquids, but I forgot that voicings can be muddy too. Not liquids or semi-liquids, but *dakuon* and *handakuon*, I see…'

'Just as an extra reference, there are no katakana with *handakuon* that also have four strokes.'

'Aah, is that so, throwing in a little bit of trivia for me as well. Colour me impressed. To manage to think of this, quite the imaginative mind you have, Suruga-senpai.'

I don't know how much he meant it, but I'll take the compliment. Even though it came from a hint from my mother in the guise of an old rival, it took me a while to unpack it.

Even if she said that 'Ganbaru Suruga' was a 'muddy nickname', to make the connection that 'Ganbaru' comes from muddying 'Kanbaru' still requires work. I may be her daughter, but I'm not psychic.

'But Suruga-senpai, I understand the kanji/katakana part, but I can't help but think, so what? Even if we're reading katakana with four strokes, wouldn't hiragana also work? They're also incredibly simple to write.'

Ougi-kun asked, seemingly impatient for an explanation.

‘They may be simple, but hiragana are more complex than katakana. In fact, excluding *dakuon* and *handakuon*, there are four hiragana with four strokes.’

‘Four…’

‘Yes, four. き (*ki*), た (*ta*), な (*na*), ほ (*ho*). But if it’s these four, then the riddle wouldn’t make sense.’

‘I don’t get it. Two or four isn’t exactly within a margin of error, but they’re not that different, either.’

‘But you can’t make any word out of *ki*, *ta*, *na* and *ho*, right? Even if you can, you’d have no idea where to start.’

‘Well, you are right. But if it’s *ki*, *ta*, *na* and *i*, *kitanai* [filthy] describes Suruga-senpai’s room perfectly.’

Harsh words from Ougi-kun, as he continued with a ‘by the way’.

‘By the way, what are the katakana that have four strokes?’

‘ネ (*ne*) and ホ (*ho*).’

‘*Ne* and *ho*? *Neho*? You still can’t piece anything meaningful from those two… there’s no word like that… wait.’

Ougi-kun realised, or at least pretended to finally realise.

Yes.

The riddle did not ask for the katakana in any order. Even so, no word can be constructed out of *ki*, *ta*, *na* and *ho*, but *ne* and *ho* on the other hand…

‘*Ho*, *ne*… *hone* (骨) [skeleton].’

Ougi-kun murmured, as he looked down the centre of the sheet.

Yes, within the passage that listed out body parts various, there is a line that mentioned skeletons.

Buried in there, yet hiding in plain sight for all to see.

‘“*Bunch the skeletons*”.’

Ougi-kun read.

‘For the person who wrote it, this is the only line that matters in an otherwise rather long passage — that’s why “*nigorinakishikakuwoyome*” was written as a hint. “To read [the katakana] that have four strokes without *dakuten*”, which is to say, “read the line with ‘skeletons’ in it”.’

‘W-what do you think?’

My confidence faltered immediately, as I asked how Ougi-kun thought. Whilst I was held up as the ace of the basketball club or the star of Naoetsu High School, I seem to be more suited to a sidekick role…

‘No objections. In fact, I’d say there’s no other explanation. Then I shall officially discard all the other theories I’ve prepared — looks like I was wrong, Suruga-senpai. You’re not as dumb as I thought.’

That last sentence was completely unnecessary, but with him saying that, I’m relieved — though I am slightly interested in what other theories he had. I can’t help but suspect that the one he formulated whilst on the phone was largely the same as what I thought up, only he didn’t say it for my sake, but I’ll let him sing his praises.

‘Ha-ha. I too am relieved that my esteemed senior isn’t a fool — then let us move on to the next step. Now that we’ve sorted out the important sentence from the posers, let’s see what it says. “Bunch the skeletons”, huh… can’t really do that now, can we?’

— Shame it wasn’t ‘gather the chest’, Ougi-kun added with genuine regret, though if that *was* the important sentence, these bad jokes really have to stop.

More than that, there’d be no need for a next step. We would be at the finish line, let alone step two.

‘Ougi-kun. By eliminating all the other lines, the “skeletons” here don’t have to be associated with biology, right?’

I pointed — at the place where the cipher was originally found.

The fusuma with a hole, exposing its internals.

In normal use, one would not pay any attention to it — but just as humans have organs, fusuma panels also have an inside.

Something that maintains its thin, rectangular shape.

Its wooden ‘skeleton’.

014

At long last, Gaen Tooe's hidden message was completely deciphered, and all's well that ends well — yeah right. The real work came after.

Intense physical labour.

First, we had to make room for disassembling the fusuma, which meant going back to cleaning the room.

Which was today's plan all along, but freeing up a fusuma plus space to move about is easier said than done. They say 'half a tatami mat awake, one tatami mat asleep' as a reminder that one should not ask for too much in life, but trying to make room for a fusuma sheet is already hard work.

Life is hard work.

We then used some tools to carefully (putting it back together would be for the best) tear down the fusuma, and retrieve the wood inside — next, we laid them out horizontally.

Laid. Or bunched, I should say.

Bunching the skeletons — like a bamboo curtain.

This required different combinations and arrangements, but eventually we pieced together a map — a canvas created from horizontally bunching up the wooden pieces, drawn in by hand.

Viewed individually, all there is are some strange black dots, but join them up and it'll form a picture; realistically it's a 3D jigsaw puzzle. So after we dealt with a jigsaw-like cipher, we had to deal with a real jigsaw — if this map has a cipher of its own, I'd probably have given up, but fortunately, this map looks like a regular map.

The map shows somewhere not far from here — is this place where the mummy parts were hidden?

Honestly…

I thought hiding a cipher in a fusuma was utterly meaningless, but it turns out the meaning was in the fusuma itself — that cipher would be some instruction manual then.

A ‘treasure map’ containing two, even three layers of obfuscation; while it felt like going back to square one in the end, anyone else would probably not be able to think of disassembling the fusuma, bunching its skeleton, and confirming what’s written on it.

‘Ha-ha. It’s all over then — right? A nice bit of mental exercise’, Ougi-kun said.

By the time I realised, the sun had already set — in the end, it felt like all I did in the afternoon was cracking a cipher. The disassembled fusuma occupied what little space that was freed up, so the room ended up looking messier than when I started; and so another day has passed… frankly, I felt empty over all this wasted time and effort.

‘Don’t say that, you can always leave it ’til tomorrow. Having a messier room than when you started is a rite of passage for a big clean-up. I’ll keep helping you out, so there’s no need to be frustrated. At least the cipher’s now done; isn’t that a good thing?’

‘No.’

I shook my head in response to his consolation.

‘The tough work is what comes next. Much labour. Physical labour, even.’

‘Huh? What do you mean?’

‘Because we *have* to head out to the place indicated on the map, right? We’ll have to recycle all the parts. What was it that you said? — that mummy had to be dealt with before some careless person uses it carelessly.’

‘I did say that… but you also said all we had to do was decipher the letter, so I thought I had to find another way to fan the flames

tomorrow.'

So you were planning on that tomorrow? How much of a fanboy are you?

Really, all this junior does is treat others' misfortunes as entertainment.

'Why the change of heart? Did something impact your mind when I was on call with Araragi-senpai? You said you were daydreaming…'

I'm not sure either.

Yes, that person made me realise how severe the whole situation was, and how naïve my understanding was, but if that was all, it wouldn't have mattered much.

It's true that the cipher wouldn't have been solved without that daydream, and that person — those two — have also told me not to search for the mummified parts.

No need to carry on Numachi Rouka's wish.

No need to carry on Gaen Tooe's will.

Then this — this is all me.

'What of cleaning your room!? How dare you abandon your abode in such wretchedness!?'

For some reason, Ougi-kun questioned me in a theatrically dramatic manner — he really is seeing all this as mere entertainment.

Ah, I get it.

I've always thought this kid seemed like someone I know… yes, he's like me.

Like last year's Kanbaru Suruga.

'I'm going to apologise to Araragi-senpai, cry, beg for him to make up with me, and ask him to clean up. I've got something else to do.

Sort out my emotions. Be it stresses or wishes, I'm sick of letting them pile up.'

'……'

'I've always wanted to be someone like Araragi-senpai — to be as gentle as he is, to be a saviour like him. But that would be in vain. However much I may worship him, I am not Araragi Koyomi. Neither Numachi Rouka, nor Gaen Tooe, and never will I be Senjougahara Hitagi — I have to become myself. If Araragi-senpai's the fool who rushes into battle for someone he could see, for someone he could fondle, then I'm going to be the fool who rushes into battle for people I don't know, for people whose mistakes I could never save.'

With that, I will surpass Araragi Koyomi.

I'll become the Kanbaru Suruga I want to be.

015

The next day, Ougi-kun and I went to the place indicated on the map and went on a spectacular, earth-shattering adventure of epic proportions, finally retrieving those mummified parts after much toil and sweat.

It is a shame, though, that whilst no unconcerned fool got to it first, there were fewer parts than we thought — out of about fifty kana I'd say we got about two.

I wouldn't say this was too much work for too little, but even so, it wears me out thinking how long the road ahead is. The thought of giving up did appear, but having thrown such grandiose words around my junior, I guess I have to persist for a while.

Well, that's how things began.

Let this be the beginning of collecting an entire devil, step by step, footprint by footprint — after all, there's still seven fusuma 'unopened' in my room.

This final high school summer break is going to be my longest yet.

No amount of bodies would be enough.

Notes

[1]. Identical Japanese pronunciation (*shimero*).

[2]. Identical Japanese pronunciation (*yasashii*).

[3]. A play on 頑張る (*ganbaru*), meaning ‘to persist’, ‘to do one’s best’. Often conjugated as 頑張って (*ganbatte*). Rendered as ‘Li’l Suruga Can-do’ in Vertical translations.

[4]. *Dakuon* (濁音, lit. ‘muddy sound’) are kana with voiced consonants (e.g. ゲ (*ge*), ダ (*da*), ボ (*bo*)), to be contrasted with unvoiced consonants (e.g. ケ (*ke*), タ (*ta*), ホ (*ho*)). These are indicated with the *dakuten* (濁点, ‘voicing mark’), two dots on the upper right corner.

[5]. *Handakuon* (半濁音, lit. ‘half-muddy sound’) are usually used to indicate h-initial kana (e.g. へ (*he*)) shifting into p-initial kana (e.g. ペ (*pe*)), indicated with a circle in the upper right corner.

The *dakuten* can also be known as the *nigoriten*, due to multiple readings of the kanji 濁.

Glossary

Purikura (プリクラ)
Photo sticker booth.

Fusuma (襖)
Sliding wooden panel used as doors in traditional Japanese houses, typically having an opaque paper or cloth layer on top. However, the book uses the hiragana form (ふすま) throughout, with the exception of 襖絵 (*fusuma-e*), which refers to the intricate drawings on the panels.

Tatami (畳)
Used as flooring in traditional Japanese homes, made of thick straw, and by extension an alternative measure of floor space. A full-sized mat measures roughly 1.8 m × 0.9 m (6’ × 3’) (roughly the same size as a *fusuma* or *shōji*, while a half-sized mat measures roughly 0.9 m × 0.9 m (3’ × 3’).

Fusuma-pan (麩パン)
Though they share the same pronunciation and are indicated the same way in the book (in hiragana, ふすま), they have different kanji.

Shōji (障子)
Sliding wooden panel used as doors in traditional Japanese houses, typically having an exposed wooden frame filled with translucent paper.

Seiza (正座)
Formal method of sitting in Japan.

Nigorizake (濁り酒)
Cloudy Japanese rice wine; *nigori* + *sake*.

Oblaat (オブラート)
A thin sheet of starch. Edible. Some Japanese sweets/candies are wrapped in this.

List of guesses for *nigorinaki*, *shikaku*, and *yome*

Nigorinaki

濁りなき
unmuddied
濁り泣き
cloudy weeping
濁り鳴き
clouded cry
濁りな木
muddied tree
濁りな気
cloudy gas
濁りな期
muddy period
濁りな記
blurry mark

Shikaku

四画
four strokes
死角
blind spot
四角
four-sided/quadrilateral
資格
qualification
刺客
assassin

Yome

読め
read
詠め
recite
嫁
bride
夜目
night-vision

Additional notes

002

{A} Nonsense Bearer

Also known as Ii-chan, the main character in Nisio's *Zaregoto* Series.

{B} Overbearing

Originally a pun on ものものしい (*monomonoshii*), meaning 'imposing', 'serious', 'pompous', 'exaggerated', but *mono* on its own means 'stuff'.

008

{C} Fanboying

Originally a kanji play between 煽 (to incite) and Ougi's name 扇 (fan, in the sense of a device that moves air).

{D} Space Creator — Ichirizuka Konomi

Variously translated as 'Space Maker' or 'Space Manipulator', a character in Nisio's *Zaregoto* Series, though she doesn't appear until the seventh volume, which as of writing has no official English translation.

{E} Thick

Originally a pun between 藪 (*yabu*, 'grove') and 闇 (*yami*, 'darkness').

009

{F} -tion

Originally a pun between 居抜き ('to leave as is') and 射貫き ('to

pierce’), both pronounced ‘*inuki*’.

011

{G} Hollow

Originally a pun between a ‘hollow existence’ (虚無の化身) and ‘striking an enemy at its weakest’ (虚をつく); 虚 can mean both ‘hollow’ or ‘weak’.

012

{H} Hiding in plain sight

Originally, 木を隠すなら森の中 — ‘hiding a tree in the woods’.